Creative Arts:
A Key Component to Creative Aging
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Abstract

Current research on aging is shifting old paradigms, from seeing it as a decline in one’s ability to seeing one’s potential. This potential has been given a new catchphrase: creative aging and it describes how individuals will approach and manage old age. Current views on creative aging will be explored, and addressing the three life tasks of, work, intimacy, and friendship will consider an Adlerian view on creative aging. Arts and aging research has deemed a multimodal approach that includes mental and physical activities, and social engagement, as essential components for creative aging. Furthermore, longitudinal research has proven that creative arts programs have considerable protective factors on the mental and physical health and wellbeing of individuals when they consistently participate in creative arts programs. The National Center for Creative Aging has established a national database on best practice creative arts programs. Ebenezer Ridges, in Burnsville, MN, incorporates those best practice elements into their multimodal approach to their Life-Long Learning creative arts programs. One particular artist collective, formed in 2008, will showcase how creative aging, its therapeutic benefits, and social engagement can be achieved from continuous engagement in a visual arts program. Social engagement will be described using Adler’s concepts of social interest and feelings of belonging.
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“We must let go of the life we have planned so as to accept the one that is waiting for us.”

Joseph Campbell

This is one of my favorite quotes from Joseph Campbell. It always reminds me that the way life unfolds, despite my best laid plans, is always abundantly more amazing than what I could have ever planned or imagined for myself. This was my experience at Ebenezer.

Little did I know that when I began my art therapy internship at Ebenezer in 2008, that I would still be there five years later; or that the artist collective that took shape under my guidance as an intern, would blossom into a self-sustaining creative group of independent living seniors. I could never have imagined any of the wonderful experiences that unfolded, such as the art show and its growing popularity, or the meaningful relationships that were formed with the artists and staff. My experience at Ebenezer is one that I could not have imagined for myself as I began my journey to be an art therapist, and I have the staff and artists to be thankful for allowing me to guide them, encourage them, and share with the my own creative spirit. They have had a significant impact on my early art therapy experiences and for that I will always be deeply grateful.
Creative Arts: A Key Component to Creative Aging

Defining Creative Aging

Interest in the idea of creative aging began over 35 years ago (Fisher & Specht, 1999), when the National Institutes of Health (NIH) began shifting their studies from the aging process and treatment to studies on normal or healthy aging (Cohen, 2000, p. 5). This shift was instrumental in influencing future studies from seeing what aging is to what is possible with aging (Cohen 2000, p. 5); from considering aging as decay and decline to seeing one’s potential. This potential has been assigned the catchphrase, “creative aging”, and is used to describe how individuals approach and manage old age. However, to understand creative aging the word creative requires a little clarification. Being creative has generally been associated with being artistic and not used to describe an older persons way of living or being. The Oxford American Writer’s Thesaurus lists the following adjectives to describe the word creative: inspired, inventive, experimental, resourceful, innovative, and productive. Today’s researchers and gerontologists describe creative aging as, fulfilling one’s potential (Cohen, 2000), meeting head on the challenges of old age, being flexible and adaptive in one’s thinking, and seeing older people for their potential rather than their problems (Hanna & Perlstein, 2008). Creative aging can also be described as a process whereby the individual seeks an original solution to a problem or challenge (Fisher & Specht, 1999). These contemporary examples from research are beginning to define the field of creative aging (Hanna & Perlstein, 2008). However, another less contemporary means to define creative aging is within the context of Adlerian psychology.
Adlerian View on Creative Aging

When Adler wrote about old age it was not in the context of current day creative aging, rather he combined successful aging in the end with being convinced of one’s spiritual survival (Ansbacher, 1992, p. 409). He wrote that an individual’s spiritual survival was dependent on previous contributions, those who contributed nothing will disappear from the world, and those who achieved will be convinced they are leaving behind a legacy for posterity; their spirit has accomplished something that will live on to eternity (p. 409). Nevertheless, using Adlerian theory, a concept of creative aging can be considered. George Linden (2007) writes about the psychological process of aging and how that process can be explained using Adler’s theory of social interest as it relates to the three tasks of life, work, intimacy, and friendship. He states for one to succeed at aging one must reframe the tasks of life, because as one ages the life tasks take on different meaning both in context and content (p. 390). For example, a person who has identified themselves with their work must make adjustments in attitude towards retirement or risk facing a future of emptiness (p. 390-391). For older people not bound by a work or business schedule, they are now unrestricted from the economic and social value demands of achievement, performance and consumption, and free to cultivate connection, discover who they are, and deepen relationships creating more intimacy (p. 392). For friendships that are deep, long lasting, and formed on intrinsic value these relationships are often shattered because of death. Relationships that were formed based on utility or pleasure may acquire higher value as one becomes more dependent on others. Not only does the comparative value of friendships shift, but also the circle of friends becomes progressively restricted (p. 393). Elders, if they choose to, can invest in new friendships with both young
and old, and stay connected by technology. Making new friends and keeping connected with the young older people can orient themselves to the future and not the past. (p. 393). By adjusting one’s perspective and attitude about aging and reframing the three-life tasks older people can discover how to invest both self and society with meaning. Their focus can shift from who they are to who they are becoming (p. 394). Although the concept of creative aging is just beginning to find its way into mainstream media and aging journals such as AARP and Generations, older people have been living creatively for decades.

**Examples of Creative Aging**

Socially, culturally, and politically, views on aging have shifted back and forth for decades; from seeing aging as a developmental process, at the turn of the twentieth century, to a collection of symptoms, chronic illness, and decline that required the management of government agencies and the medical community by mid-century (Hirshbein, 2001). Since research has made the shift in the last fifty plus years to study what the normal aging process is, and mainstream media focusing on older peoples potential rather than their decline, views on aging seem to have come full circle. Consider the last 100 years, numerous examples of older people who, despite disabilities or illness, or government or medical intervention, continued to engage in their life’s work until the end. These individuals, and others too numerous to mention, met the challenges of old age and chose to live life creatively. Individuals like Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) known for his work as a missionary in Africa for which he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952 at age 72. Helen Keller (1880-1968) published *Teacher*, at age 75, Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) who contributed significantly to the design and aesthetics of early to mid-century modern architecture, and who designed the Guggenheim at age 91 (Cohen,
2000), and Mother Teresa (1910-1997) who created the Missionaries of Charity and devoted her life to serving the poor of India ("Mother Teresa of Calcutta Center,"). Other notable and creative individuals were Carl Jung (1875-1961), a Swiss psychiatrist who founded analytical psychology, and considered creativity as part of the unconscious life and rooted in what he called the “collective unconscious” (Cohen, 2000), and Alfred Adler (1870-1937), an Austrian medical doctor who founded the individual school of psychology. His revolutionary observations triggered a life of research dedicated to understanding people. His comprehensive theory of human behavior resulted in models of practice that have had broad impact on the fields of education, social sciences, family life, psychology and psychotherapy (North American Society of Adlerian Psychology, 2011).

Not every older person has to accomplish on this grand a scale to live creatively. In his book, *The Creative Age: Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life* (2000), Gene Cohen talks about Harvard Prof. Howard Gardner’s definition of creativity. Gardner states there are two types, creativity with a “big C” and creativity with at “little c”. Creativity with a “big C” applies to the extraordinary accomplishments of unusual people, such as those described; creativity with a “little c” is grounded in the various and miscellaneous realities of life (pp. 24-25). The “little c”, as Howard describes, is the majority of everyday people, but that are no less important in the way they develop their potential for their own highly successful creative lives. He further writes that public creativity represents creative acts that are recognized and celebrated by one’s own community, or culture. Personal creativity depicts something new, a product, idea, or a fresh perspective; something that has been brought into being that enhances life and gives satisfaction (p. 25).
Creative Aging in the Twenty-First Century

In the twenty-first century, creative aging will not only encompasses how older people will meet the challenges of aging, or how they will transform those challenges into opportunities, but what they do with the time they have. How will they live life with purpose and meaning?

We always think of winding down in old age," says Judith Salerno, deputy director of the National Institute on Aging. "We need to begin thinking about late life as an opportunity for people to explore." Oldsters may not be as quick or prolific as they were in their 20s, but experience is a rich resource. Those who learn to tap it, as they grow older can accomplish amazing things and sometimes develop talents they never recognized (Springen & Seibert, 2005, p. 45).

With changes in biomedicine and an emphasis on a healthier lifestyle the up and coming cohort of retirees, known as the baby boomers, will have the potential to live out their remaining time for 15, 20, even 30 more years after retirement even with chronic conditions. This new demographic will approach aging, not as a decline in function or ability, but rather a renewal, a time for regrowth, or second act (Medina, 2008). They will want to optimize every opportunity and services afforded and show what individual potential can be to aging creatively.

Not every person over 65 will want to engage in creating an encore career; many will instead focus their attention and energy on more personal interests. This will be an opportune time to concentrate on personal interests that, for whatever reason, were put aside as careers and family became the sole focus. Whatever pursuits older people choose creative aging will most certainly center on staying active, staying connected with
community, and a continuous engagement in activities that stimulate cognitive function. Further, creative aging will also include opportunities to master new skills, and will provide meaning and purpose in life. Research has shown that by engaging in the arts, such as dance, visual arts, or community theatre, individuals have multiple opportunities to master new skills, be active, and stay connected with community, all factors that are key components to creative aging.

**Creative Arts Programs**

The National Center for Creative Aging (NCCA), founded in 2001, has dedicated itself to the understanding of the vital relationship between creative expression and healthy aging and develop programs that build on this understanding ("National Center for Creative Aging,"). Their objectives are multiple, but central to their mission is to evaluate creative arts and aging programs to identify and promote best practices, glean lessons of model programs to create technical assistance training programs, support the replication of best practice models through existing or new arts programs nationally, and serve as a clearing-house for the exchange of best practice creative arts programs, and lastly, to support research and policy towards developing the field of creative arts programs for older adults ("National Center for Creative Aging,").

**Best Practice**

Research has begun to define the essential criteria for what best practice is for a creative arts program; suggesting they provide a number of enriching and meaningful opportunities for older adults that foster; social interaction between the generations (Larson, 2006), social engagement amongst participants (Hanna, 2006), and provide active engagement through physical movement (Wikstrom, 2002). Creative arts programs also
provide opportunities for older adults that increase skill and mastery thus developing a strong sense of control and self-confidence (Patterson & Perlstein, 2011, p. 28). Patterson and Perlstein (2011) clarify the difference between arts and crafts and artistic activities saying; arts and crafts projects are often called busy work and may serve to keep people occupied, whereas artistic activities go farther and engage the mind, body, and emotions, sparking curiosity, problem solving, and artistic accomplishment (p. 28). Further, research reveals that when creative arts programs for older adults incorporate multimodal activities, such as physical exercise, mental stimulation, social interaction and activities that reduce chronic stress they are proving to be protective against cognitive decline and dementia (Patterson & Perlstein, 2011, p. 31).

**The Impact on Health and Cognitive Functioning**

Literature on aging and creative arts in health care has determined that creative arts programs for older adults are considered to be an integral component for successful aging. A landmark study conducted by Cohen et al. (2006), on creativity and aging, was a multisite, longitudinal study that had the goal of “measuring the impact of professionally conducted community-based cultural programs on the general health, mental health, and social activities of older adults aged 65 and older” (Patterson & Perlstein, 2011, p. 28). The study found that older adults who sustain involvement in a high quality participatory art program report improved general health and moral. Conversely, they also found a reduction in doctor visits, medication use, and loneliness (Cohen et al., 2006, p. 733).

Participation in arts programs also has a positive effect on cognitive function. Patterson and Perlstein (2007) cite a study in which the aim was to determine whether one month of intensive training in theater could raise various measures of cognitive and
affective (mood) health. The control groups consisted of a visual arts course that examined a work of art and speculated on the artist’s intention or the interpretation of ambiguous images, and a no-intervention group. The control groups took the same tests and got the same information as the theater group, but received no training. The results of the study showed that the theater participants improved significantly from pre-test to post-test over no-treatment controls on two out of three cognitive variables—recall and problem solving. The participants also improved on psychological wellbeing. The results also showed that the theater group scored significantly higher than the visual arts group on both problem solving and psychological wellbeing (p. 29 & 29). Furthermore, the report found that complex activities like theater, and most arts activities involve forms of physical activity, mental challenge, and social engagement. Each of these activities has been associated with protection against cognitive decline and dementia (Paterson & Perlstein, 2011, p. 31). Paul Coleman, a professor of neurobiology found that three important factors predict how well healthy adults maintain cognitive function as they age, mental activity, physical activity, and social engagement (Sherman, 2006).

**Ebenezer’s Life Long Learning Program**

In its pursuit to develop and expand best practice creative arts programs the NCCA has also created a national directory, whereby they recognize best practice creative arts programs throughout the country. On the directory list is the Life-Long Learning Program located at Ebenezer Ridges in Burnsville, MN. The Life-Long Learning Program began in 2002 and is an intergenerational shared-site program. It brings together children from the child-care center and older adults from the four components of the Ebenezer Ridges continuum of care campus (skilled nursing facility, assisted living residence, adult day
center, and independent housing) to engage in creative activities. The program offers
dance, folk and traditional art, poetry and literature, music, musical theater, visual arts,
museum visits, sign language, foreign language (Spanish) and community service
("National Center for Creative Aging, Ebenezer Ridges life-long learning program ") and
recently added a health and wellness coach to the program.

The Life-Long Learning Program at Ebenezer provides quality arts programs that
not only engage residence in multimodal activities it also provides projects that include
collaboration with community partners. The program is designed to give older adults a
sense of purpose, the opportunity to grow and learn, and a way to build meaningful
relationships across generations as they participate in shared daily activities ("National
Center for Creative Aging, Ebenezer Ridges life-long learning program ").

**Establishing the Artist Collective**

Ebenezer is dedicated to providing a best practice creative arts program and will
make the extra effort to see that it meets the needs of its residences. Andrea Lewandoski,
the coordinator of Ebenezer’s Life-Long Learning & Intergenerational Program saw a
need for some of the artists who attended the twice-monthly watercolor class to have its
own group. She saw the watercolor class was not meeting the needs of these more
independent skilled artists, and presented the idea of forming their own art group. This
group would be, in addition to the other art classes offered, and they would have the
opportunity to work with an art therapist. The artists, who ranged in age from mid-sixties
well into ninety, had a wide range of art experiences. Some of the artists had pursued
visual arts at various times throughout adolescence and young adulthood, but put those
pursuits aside when marriage or careers came along. Some artists had never painted but
had been creative in other ways, such as sewing, egg painting, jewelry design, and woodworking, and others had never so much as picked up a crayon past childhood.

The artists, who live at the Ridge Point Independent Living apartments on the Ebenezer campus, met with Andrea, Denise Bierle Svec, apartment manager, and Donna Morris, art therapy intern from Adler Graduate School, in August 2008 to talk about what their needs and wants were.

The artists expressed a desire to meet more than two times a month to pursue their creative interests. In addition, they wanted to be self-directed, they wanted their art work to reflect their interests, and wanted to choose their own topics and themes. Additionally, the artists wanted to explore a variety of medium, and work at their pace. The open art studio model met all their requirements. This model allows for both individual and collaborative work, as well as opportunities to explore a wide range of creative approaches as interest dictates at one’s own pace. In addition to these requirements the artists wanted, what they described as, a teacher to be available to help solve technical problems, and to talk about creative process and ideas.

**Therapeutic Benefits**

This non-directed open art studio model is ideal for this independent group of artists, though it differs from a therapeutic open group model. As Rubin (1999) states, in a therapeutic open group, the trend has been toward approaches, which consciously use the power of the group in conjunction with the power of the art (p. 172). Though these artists did not form for clinical purposes, there are, however, therapeutic benefits that are inherent within a creative arts group that meets consistently, even though the artists work independently of each other. The simple act of engaging in a creative process can have a
healing and protective effect on mental wellbeing just as research has shown. Loosing ones self, or getting in the flow, and loosing awareness of time can promote relaxation, reduce blood pressure, boost the immune system, and reduce stress (Leckey, 2011). The active process of creative exploration not only enhances mental wellbeing, it also allows the artist to discover and build on his or her strengths and life experience (Stephenson, 2006). For some of the artists, the creative process and exploration can have more profound psychological effects. One artist who loves to draw portraits was able to understand more clearly the dynamic relationship between she and her mother regarding beauty. This artist stated as a little girl she was intrigued by her mother’s beauty, and always watched her mother dress up and put on make-up. The artist wondered if her attraction to drawing portraits was her way of finding beauty within herself? What makes this discovery important for this artist is the self-guided exploration of images or themes, in this case portrait drawing, that generated an awareness and possibly a deeper understanding of her perceptions about self, and not some imposed didactic process (Dreikurs, 1976). Not all the artists have this deep or profound a discovery, but self-actualization regarding personal strength and potential can be achieved through a creative process (Landau & Moaz, 1978).

**Encouraging Social Interest and Feelings of Belonging**

Aside from the therapeutic benefits of the creative process, the group also functions in other ways that are of value to each other and their community. Research suggests that participation in any type of creative group provides a connection with others and has potential to create a community, and maintaining those connections are significant to the health and wellbeing of older people. In Adlerian psychology being engaged in the
community can also be described as “feelings of belonging” and “social interest” and are expressed in this group through their interactions with each other, storytelling, and an annual art show. Social interest, as Adler defines it, is the action line of community feeling (Ansbacher, 1992 p. 405), and the action is the guiding behavior that unites individuals with others to accomplish a task in cooperation (Ferguson, 1989). Furthermore, individuals who demonstrate social interests are what Adler termed useful people who come together in cooperation to achieve a shared vision or goal (Ansbacher, 1992).

The Artist Collective

Observing the artist’s actions towards each other one can observe feelings of belonging and social interest. The artists show interest in what each is doing and will discuss amongst themselves creative process, techniques, or subject matter. The more skilled artists will share techniques with those who are less experienced or with new group members. The artists also assist each other in solving technical problems, and encourage each other to expand skills by taking risks on more challenging projects. On occasion, they will work in collaboration on a piece of artwork for donation or auction for an Ebenezer fundraiser, as well. They are also very accomplished at organizing the annual art show and more than willing to guide new artists through the process.

This collective of artists are also a support network for each other, especially in times of illness or even death. Between November 2012 and April 2013, three fellow artists died. The group became a safe place to talk about the passing of their fellow artists and friends. Each member uniquely responded to the deaths; some were deeply affected and shared their feelings about death openly, remarking that the passing of their friends were a contemplation of their own mortality. For one artist, the unexpected passing of her
dear friends significantly increased her anxiety level. The support of her fellow artists and her willingness to continue with art making helped her to process her fear and anxiety about death and the sadness she felt about losing her friends. Interestingly, the older artists, who are in their eighties and nineties, appeared to take the deaths in stride, remarking that it was part of life.

What is unique about this group, aside from other creative art groups that come together, is that they live in the same apartment building, and have established a social structure outside the group. They spend time engaged in collaborative community activities, they loan their artwork for exhibits at the nearby hospital and church, and organize outings that will increase their knowledge of visual arts.

**Storytelling**

Storytelling is also a powerful way to establish cohesiveness and feelings of belonging amongst members within their community (Carlson, Watts, & Maniacci, 2006 p 222). Adler, describes feelings of belonging as someone who feels part of a larger community, a social embeddedness (Ansbacher, 1992). The first few months of meeting were a time of relationship building. The artists were familiar with each other in that they had seen each other around the apartment building, and some had been going to the monthly painting classes offered, but they had not socialized beyond that. As time passed there was a certain comfort level and familiarity growing between the group members and the telling of rich life stories began. Storytelling was significant in that it allowed each artist to share events of their life that were of particular significance, and to transform oral history and experiences into visual stories.
One artist, in her early nineties, grew up on a farm in Devil’s Lake, North Dakota. She shared what her life was like growing up on a farm in the early part of the twentieth century. Many of her childhood experiences are strongly represented in her paintings and artists, friends and family remark how similar her paintings are to the folk art paintings of Grandma Moses. This artist creates bucolic scenes incorporating vignettes from her childhood into her painting. Characteristics such as the house she was born in, the car her family owned, or a pond she and her siblings skated on, are depicted in her paintings to varying degrees. These images have significant meaning for the artist and play a role in her artwork and for her family as well. The older generations recognize the familiar places in her paintings, which in turn initiates the reminiscing and the storytelling to the younger generations. Her memories of early life on the farm and her experiences will be sustained through her paintings and will live from one generation to the next.

Another artist, who was in her late eighties, her hands gnarled from rheumatoid arthritis came to the weekly gatherings to work on her paintings. In her younger years she was a nurse and skilled sewer. As a young adult, she had sewn all her clothes, her wedding dress included; she even sewed her children’s Halloween costumes. Due to the condition of her hands she wasn’t able to sew any longer, but she could hold a paintbrush. Instead of creating clothing from beautiful floral fabric her artistic voice was transformed by painting in the impressionistic style of Monet. Towards the end of her life she wasn’t able to paint as quickly as she had in the past and would often fall asleep, non-the-less, she was determined to make it to the Friday gathering. She remarked many times that she just wanted to be around creative people who just happen to be her friends. When she passed away last year her family held a memorial in the chapel at Ebenezer; on display were
photos of clothes she had sewn, a picture of her in her uniquely created wedding dress, her paintings, alongside them, note and greeting cards printed from her paintings. Family and friends remarked how colorful her paintings were, similar to the clothes she’d sewn, and her grown children grateful for the creative legacy she left behind.

Carolyn Zablotny, director of Elders Share the Arts, in Brooklyn, N.Y., says storytelling makes connections where connections are not apparent. Each person has stories to tell and those stories illustrate ones belonging to groups, families, communities, regions, and cultures. They allow the possibility to feel belonging to a broader community (Zablotny, 2006). Through storytelling, whether oral or visual, it was evident that shared life experiences made connections for this group where none had existed before.

**The Annual Art Show**

Every year for the past five years, the Ridge Point artists have held an annual art show. The primary intention is to demonstrate to community, family and friends that no matter what age there is potential to tap into one’s creative energy, and in the case of the Ridge Point artists, demonstrate this through visual arts. Other intentions for the art show are to increase the group’s development of social interest and feelings of belonging. One way this is accomplished is by the collective collaboration of the Ridge Point community. Before the first art show, none of artists had ever been to an art opening, and no one at Ridge Point had ever organized such an event. Planning the show brought many of the residences together to accomplish the task, and those interested in organizing the art show sign up for specific committee work. Invitations for the show are newly designed each year, an hors d’oeuvre menu is planned, and organizing the space for artists to display work is a task in cooperative planning. Each artist writes a new artists statement about the
importance or impact art has had on his or her life, and their creative interest and process, plus the job of getting artwork complete begins in earnest. The art show also inspires other creative people living at Ridge Point to exhibit their work as well; further embracing and celebrating the creativity of the Ridge Point community.

The third year of the art show a short documentary was made, by Donna Morris, art therapy intern from Adler Graduate School, showcasing the Ridge Point artists and their art show. Permission was obtained to film and interview each of the artists who attended the Friday morning art group, Craig Balfany, Director of the Art Therapy Program at Adler Graduate School, and Donna Morris, conducted the interviews. The short film combines images of the artist’s work, setting up for the art show, and brief interviews. The last segment of the film takes place the following day, and is a short discussion between three of the artist, two for whom this was their first art show, and the third for which this show was his third.

Interview questions for the film were very informal and focused on the role art played in each of the artist’s life, what they saw as the benefits, and how they became interested in art or their chosen medium. Most of the artists remarked now that they were retired they had time to indulge their creative pursuits. One artist stated even though he made furniture and wood toys throughout his life he had no idea he could paint until his niece invited him to a watercolor class. When he discovered his new talent, he decided to continue with painting. One artist said she specifically chose to live at Ridge Point after a site visit one Friday morning with her daughter. She said she didn’t want to look any further for a place to live because she had found what she was looking for. This artist even came to the weekly Friday art groups before she moved in. When asked how art making
played a role in their life the comments were all compatible with research findings. Art making gave them an outlet for expression, reduced stress and worry, they liked creating art from nothing, and they liked the idea of being part of a community of artists.

The following day a few of the artists met for a few minutes before the regular group meeting time to process their art show experience. The art therapist wanted to get their reaction and impressions to being in the show, and what the experience was like, showing their work publicly. For the two new artists the experience was not like any they had before. Comments ranged from being a bit overwhelmed to having pride in their accomplishments, were expressed, and comments, questions and interests from family and guests made them proud of their work and boosted their confidence, said they felt like real artists.

**Personal Impact of Art Making**

The day of the first art show, five years ago, was an exciting time for the artists, and for new artists who participate in upcoming annual art shows, a significant event for them on many levels. The show becomes a turning point in their perception about their artwork and their relationship to the art. Instead of seeing themselves as a person who does art, or someone who paints, they begin to identify themselves as an artist, and their artwork as a representation of who they are and their interests. For some artists, their work is a personal exploration of inner emotions and serves as a vehicle for working out conflict or reframing significant experiences. For other artists, their artwork is a journey to explore new medium and discover new techniques and skills, and yet for others, artwork narrates their history or life story. These outcomes are not unique or surprising; they are consistent with the current research on creative arts and aging. The impact from the once a week art
group meeting has influenced these artists to expand their creative interests. One artist
decided she was going to design greeting cards, which she started selling at the art show;
word got around campus how beautiful and unique her cards are she now sells them
around the Ebenezer campus. Another artist, who had not had any experience with art
previous to her joining the group, worked a whole year with pastels and is now exploring
other medium. She is also creating personal greeting cards from her artwork, and another
artist has taken on a second commission. What has been most surprising for these artists is
the potential to sell their work or in some cases take on commissions for pay. Selling
artwork, as one artist put it, “wasn’t even on my radar when I started with this group.”
None of the artists really thought about selling their work until people who attended the art
show began asking them what the prices were on their work. Selling artwork is not the
primary objective, but it is a topic that gets thoughtfully discussed before each art show.
The artists, if they choose to sell, price each piece of work based on time and materials.
Certain ethical considerations would need to be taken into account if the group was
meeting for clinical reasons. However, since this group is not a clinical art therapy group
selling work has not been an issue. Each artist makes the decision whether or not to
exhibit and sell work; they have complete control over which pieces they present, and how
much they want to disclose about the genesis of each work.

In fact exhibiting and selling work has had a positive effect on each of the artists.
As reported by them it has increased their self-esteem and confidence in their ability to
master new skills, and reinforces their creative risks taking. They admit that getting
immersed in the creative process is very relaxing, but it’s also challenging too, as they try
to strike a balance between creative process and product, and, as reported by one artist,
“having limited funds like I do, bringing in a little money from my art work is an unexpected benefit and I’m okay with that.” The artist are well aware too, that selling work at every art show is not a given.

The positive response from family and community has also contributed to the artist’s confidence. Family members remark over and over about the creativity of all the artists who exhibits work, from unique egg paintings to hand-sewn quilts to finely crafted woodwork. Over 100 guests walked through Ridge Point community room during the first annual art show, and large crowds continue to attend each year. Furthermore, future art shows would go on to include artists from other areas of the campus. Photographs, pottery, and watercolor paintings from the residence living at the Ebenezer care center, and those in assisted living at Arbors are exhibited alongside the Ridge Point artists. The art show has become representative of what is possible in old age no matter what your ability or disabilities are. The show continues to be a campus wide annual event that brings in guests from all areas of the Ebenezer campus. It brings in friends and family, as well as staff from Fairview Ridges Hospital, and the broader Burnsville community.

**Conclusion**

The Ridge Point art show continues to be a community event that brings meaning, purpose, and cooperation to the artists and residence by working towards a common goal; organizing an art show (Ansbacher, 1992). Each person who contributes their time to its success demonstrates community feeling and social interest (Ferguson, 2003), and each task performed contributes to the welfare of community (Shifron, 2010). Not only that, Ebenezer has set the standard, as have other nationally recognized creative arts and aging programs across the country, for what best practice creative arts programs are comprised
Programs like Elder Share the Arts; a community based non-profit arts program in the Bronx, dedicated to improving the quality of life of older New Yorkers through its unique synthesis of oral history and community arts (Larson & Perlstein, 2003 p. 151). This arts program was also instrumental in inspiring the formation of a new national organization, the National Center for Creative Aging (NCCA), which is committed to shaping the diverse field of Creative Aging through training programs, evaluation of arts and aging programs and replicating best practice. The NCCA advocates for public policy that supports quality art programs, and sees them as essential to the wellbeing of older people.

The artists at Ridge Point, and other creative older people on the Ebenezer campus, are prime examples of what researchers in the field of arts and aging, and gerontologists, describe as living creatively. Not because they engage in art, but it is through the creative art process they have been able to discover new potential for themselves. They have learned to challenge their skill by taking risks on new and bigger projects, and increased problem solving skills. They discover new ways to express their voices, and create something using their imagination. What happens incidentally through the creative process is the discovery about who they are and what they are capable of; they discover their potential.

Creative arts programs significantly enhance the quality of life for anyone who engages in them, but for older adults especially, participating in creative arts can have an immense impact on physical health and mental health. Longitudinal research has proven that multimodal creative arts programs can improve mood, decrease doctor visits, and drug use, improve memory, and decrease the effects of cognitive decline and dementia. Creative arts programs bridge the gap between loneliness and community feeling; they
provide community activities that foster intergenerational connections, and most importantly, provide meaning and purpose in their life. Most importantly, creative arts programs provide a sense of value and worth. This is especially important because no matter how well or creative older people age or live in the twenty-first century society will still continue to establish what matters in this youth oriented culture (Linden, 2007). So it is incumbent upon those who work in the creative arts and aging field to continue the challenging work of establishing new arts programs using those best practice models as examples and improving on the ones that already exist. Older adults need this field (Larson & Perlstein, 2003) and so does the rest of society, it is that important. As Dr. Gene Cohen writes, “creativity is inherent in everyone and can, and should be, nurtured throughout life” (Hanna & Perlstein, 2008). Aging is a journey, not an end.
Resources on Aging and the Arts

The following is a partial list of resources that provide useful information on arts and aging (Generations 2006).

American Society on Aging (ASA)  www.asaging.org

The ASA is a national nonprofit, membership organization that informs the public and health professional about issues affecting the quality of life for older people and promotes innovative approaches to meet these needs, including creativity and aging.

National Institute on Aging (NIA)  www.nih.gov/nia

NIA is the federal research program most involved in supporting studies of aging. In addition to providing information on research findings, much practical information is offered through the Institute’s diverse publications.

National Center for Creative Aging  www.creativeaging.org

The NCCA is dedicated to fostering an understanding of the vital relationship between creative expression and the quality of life of older people through serving as a clearinghouse for the exchange of information; evaluating arts and aging programs in order to identify best practice models and promote their replication nationally.

Local Minnesota creative arts programs and organizations.

ArtSage  www.artsagemn.org

ArtSage is a catalyst for the field of arts and aging. They provide training for artists and organizations that want to work with older adults. They consult with senior-serving organizations that want to incorporate arts into their programming and they provide resources, best practices and leadership in the growing field of arts and aging.

Ebenezer  http://www.fairviewebenezer.org/Learning/

Ebenezer’s Life Long Learning Initiative is a collection of coordinated arts and education programs designed to foster growth and creativity for seniors. They offer numerous opportunities for Life Long Learning through their partnerships with Northern Clay Center, MacPhail Center for Music, and Kairos Dance Theatre. They also provide enriching and challenging opportunities from teaching artists in the fields of visual arts, creative writing, horticultural therapy, continuing education classes, and Spiritual care.
References


National Center for Creative Aging, Ebenezer Ridges life-long learning program.


